

Brexit and the Meddlesome Mr. Obama

In the din of the campaign for the U.S. presidential nominations, there has been little attention in the United States to what could be one of the most important votes in modern history, on whether the United Kingdom remains in the European Union or not. This is an issue that very few Americans have ever understood. The natural impulse of American statesmen and the U.S. media that pay any attention to foreign affairs has been to assume that, compared with the influence of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and most of the other Western European countries, the presence of Great Britain in such a group would be a positive and stabilizing one, and a comparative voice for trans-Atlantic cooperation. While the Cold War was in progress, this was a particularly plausible view. The Communist parties of France and Italy gained 20 percent or more of the votes in the general elections of those countries for many years, and Germany, divided as it was and with its historic capital divided and set amidst the occupying Soviet army in East Germany, needed all the stabilization and reassurance available, given its recent Nazi and Communist history.

This perspective was at least arguable, though it hindered U.S. policymakers from seeing the need to treat the main European powers otherwise than as client-states. President Eisenhower rejected the initiative of the French president, General de Gaulle, to establish a tripartite directorate of NATO. Ostensibly, Eisenhower feared the impact of this on West Germany and Italy, but really, American thinking was that de Gaulle had no capacity to play the role for France that he aspired to, and that post-Suez Britain was a melting iceberg. There was thus no reason to pool American authority with declining powers whose artificial eminence would fluster and

annoy the other NATO countries. The Kennedy administration, because it did not want the British and French to have an independent nuclear force at all, devised the idea of the Atlantic Nuclear Force, to which the U.S., the U.K., and France would contribute, and which American admirals would direct, and presto, the United States would command the European nuclear naval arsenal. The British were no more enthused at this prospect than the French, but British prime minister Harold Macmillan was happy to leave it to de Gaulle to scuttle that chimerical fleet.

Of course, de Gaulle quickly established himself as, with Mao Tse-tung, the most important statesman in the world next to the American and Soviet leaders, especially so with the U.S. mired in Vietnam and the USSR having to keep its hobnailed jackboot on the neck of occupied Eastern Europe. Britain retained considerable independent influence and, under Margaret Thatcher, resumed its position as a formidable and intercontinental U.S. ally. The British Conservatives conveniently pushed out Mrs. Thatcher, one of the great leaders of British history, largely over her reservations about Europe, which most of her countrymen now share, and have waffled on most foreign-policy issues since, except the ill-considered Iraq War and Libyan intervention.

As the momentum of European economic union brought forward a powerful move toward political union in at least Western Europe, American policy fell in rather unthinkingly behind this movement, assuming that the larger and more cohesive the European entity was, the less would be the American defense burden. There were several fallacies in that argument. Europe was trying to cohere, as the Cold War ended, precisely to stand on one another's national shoulders, enjoy the recession of the Russian threat, and then challenge the U.S. for world leadership, as if the entire century following the outbreak of World War I were an aberrant internecine dispute interrupting briefly Europe's natural domination of the world. Europe, as a

political concept, was never very pro-American, nor was it very well disposed to what de Gaulle called the "Anglo-Saxons."

The United States, under the first Bush and Clinton administrations, continued to try to propel Britain by the scruff of the neck and the small of the back into Europe, on the theory that the British would make the Europeans more Atlanticist and amenable to the Americans, as well as more unambiguously vigilant toward the East. The other major European powers do not have durable political institutions that have functioned well. But Britain's parliamentary and unitary-government system, adapted gradually with only a few violent disturbances in the 800 years since the Magna Carta, have served the country well and been widely emulated in the world. In the abstract, the British are not enthused about stripping these institutions to pile authority over how the British people live on new-fledged institutions run largely by Belgian and Dutch (unelected and not overly accountable) officials and a talking shop of a parliament with more interpreters than legislators. Britain under Thatcher, and even her successors, has less governmental regimentation and generally lower taxes than most of Europe, where, for notorious historical reasons, vast quantities of Danegeld are paid to keep the working and agrarian classes tranquil. One of the many abrasive moments between Thatcher and the Euro-centralizers was when then-European Union president Jacques Delors told British unions that everything that had been taken from them by Thatcher would be restored by Europe.

The only U.S. administrations that showed much sensitivity to the British Euroskeptics in the last 50 years were those of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Nixon knew a lot about British history and knew that, whenever presented with the choice between intimacy with Europe and the blue water – including by new monarchs who had come from France, the Netherlands, and Germany (Charles II – a restoration; William

III – a coup by the king's daughters; and George I – the previous dynasty had run out) – Britain has chosen independence and overseas associations. Reagan was less versed in British history, but developed such an intimate political relationship with Margaret Thatcher that he came to be more convinced of the need for close cooperation with Britain even than Franklin D. Roosevelt was in his relations with Winston Churchill. (Both pairs of leaders also became very close to the contemporary Canadian prime ministers, W. L. Mackenzie King in World War II and Brian Mulroney at the end of the Cold War.)

The British unanimously approve the disappearance of ancient hatreds and conflicts across most of Europe, the advanced level of free commerce, the ease of cross-border movement by legitimate travelers, and greater cooperation generally. Most would prefer something approaching free trade, as long as it is not stunted by self-serving protectionism by the French and Germans. But the officially espoused goal of “an ever closer union” is not shared by the majority of Britons. Prime Minister David Cameron got a lucky bounce in the general election last year when he gained only moderately, but the other parties divided very conveniently for him. The opposition Labour party lost almost all its former lock on Scotland to local separatists; the UK Independence Party (UKIP) took a piece out of Labour and, with Cameron's Conservatives, virtually destroyed the Liberal Democrats, coalition partners in the outgoing government. Cameron emerged with a Conservative majority, affirming the accuracy of Napoleon's maxim that the best generals are the lucky ones.

Cameron has always been a Eurofederalist, though his party is almost evenly divided on the issue. He had deferred the question by promising an eventual referendum on whether to remain in the European Union or not. This drastic choice was presumably selected because Cameron believed that, faced with an in-or-out choice, the British voters would be wary of a

complete departure and would hold their noses and leap into Europe once and for all, shedding their national sovereignty like slender swimmers losing their bathing suits as they dive into the water. The opposition Labour party is as divided as the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Scottish Nationalists are in the "remain" group, and UKIP is a solid block of leavers, one-eighth of the voters.

Cameron purported to gain important concessions from Brussels to present to his countrymen for their approval of an upgraded status of the U.K. in Europe. This was a canard. Cameron had promised to achieve a "full-on treaty change" and recovery of sovereignty over migration from the EU and over employment law. All Cameron has delivered in fact is that the European Commission will listen to applications from Britain to limit working benefits for migrants to the U.K. This cannot be sold as a retrieval of sovereignty, and more than 40 percent of the Conservative members of Parliament are overtly EU-leavers, despite their leader's being the chief of the remainers. The country's apparently most popular politician, Boris Johnson, mayor of London, is the unofficial leader of the leavers, and polls show the two sides neck and neck in the run-up to the June 23 referendum. Naturally, there is a good deal of hyperbole bubbling up on each side, as claims from the remainers of economic turmoil in Britain rippling out to the whole world contest for the faith of the public with the assurance of the leavers that a better and less subservient regime based on fair trade and reasonable cooperation could be negotiated. In fact, the treaty stipulates a two-year period of negotiation and the Domsday scenario is rubbish.

Faithful to the traditional reflex of American administrations, especially the Democratic ones, President Obama is going to visit Britain and urge a vote for Cameron's option, repaying the British prime minister for the impropriety he committed for Obama by lobbying U.S. senators in favor of the reprehensible Iran nuclear agreement. Veteran

Thatcherite MP John Redwood remarked: "If letting foreign countries impose laws on you, levy taxes on you, and spend your money is such a good idea, why doesn't Obama create an American Union so Mexico can have common borders with the U.S., Cuba can spend U.S. tax on itself, and Brazil can impose laws on the U.S. that the U.S. doesn't want? If he did that, he would be in a stronger moral position to lecture us on having common borders with Eastern Europe, having Greece spend our money, and having laws the Germans want but we don't."

Obama's foreign policy seems to consist of asking America's allies and enemies simply to exchange places and roles, and trying to immerse the U.K. in a German-dominated Europe is in that bizarre tradition (not that the Germans are enemies, of course, but they hear the anti-American forest murmurs a good deal more credulously than the British, especially the British Conservatives, do). If Britain entrenches itself in Europe, the United States will have less leverage with Europe and none with Britain. If Britain renegotiates a close but outside relationship with Europe, it will gravitate back toward a substantial relationship with its senior associates of the old Commonwealth: Canada, Australia, India, New Zealand, and Singapore. Even a loose bloc of those states would be a positive force in the world and would be available to the U.S. as a close ally in times of need, which have tended to recur over the last century. As usual, President Obama is lurching with stumbling foot and cloth ear to meddle where he has no business and to the disadvantage of the national interest of the United States and its closest ally (at least until June 23).

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